

UNSETTLING HOPE: EMILY DICKINSON, THOMAS WENTWORTH
HIGGINSON, AND THE RECORD OF
A REFORM FRIENDSHIP

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ABSTRACT

In the pages that follow I reassess the relationship between two of nineteenth-century America's most radical figures: Emily Dickinson and Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Dickinson, of course, is a private radical, in her invention and interrogation of poetic forms. Higginson, conversely, is a public radical, as militant abolitionist, member of the Secret Six, and commander of the first regiment of emancipated slaves. This friendship, I contend, finds its roots in the reform movement—an effort in which men and women in nineteenth-century America crossed socially imposed boundaries to forge friendships that might aid them as they sought to remake their world.

Dickinson, however, showed little to no interest in reformers' most valiant causes, making Higginson a most unusual choice for advice and friendship. In my first chapter I read the correspondence between Dickinson and Higginson as religious to provide a framework for understanding the origins of their friendship in the reform movement. I contend that Dickinson sought Higginson's guidance as a 'true believer' rather than as a literary mentor. Beyond their mutual interest in religious expression, Dickinson becomes more closely connected both to the war efforts and to the larger project of social reform in New England. Further, by attending to their employment of tropes of time and loss in wartime letters, poems, and essays, I connect their dialectic of time and loss to the larger context of the United States at war.

In my second chapter, I examine Higginson's writings, many of which have received little if any scholarly attention, in conversation with Dickinson's poetry. Since Higginson is, after all, one of the first and only readers of Dickinson's poetry during the nineteenth-century, I further examine Higginson's work in light of Dickinson's verse. Higginson's references and responses, implicit and

explicit, to Dickinson's poems illustrate that her thought found its way to public audiences through their friendship.

This odd relationship shared between Higginson—a symbol of the public, the political, the rhetorical—and Dickinson—a stark image of the private, the personal, the poetic—illustrates the power of spiritualized friendships within nineteenth-century America to cross the lines of gender, politics, and genre. Together the poet and the rhetorician conceived again and again of the flood subject, Immortality.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Fr *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Ed. R. W. Franklin. 3 vols. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1998.

Citation by poem number.

L *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*. Ed. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward. 3 vols.

Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1958. Citation by letter number.

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Gratitude is the only secret that cannot reveal itself. –ED

I am interested in friendships, in part, because I am daily blessed by many of my own. To the lifelong friends that are my family: my gratitude, always. In particular, my sister offered her excitement and advice all along and never told me this would be an easy process.

My parents deserve more gratitude than I can say. I'm so happy that I have come to think of them as friends.

In the terms laid out in the pages ahead, friends encourage and stimulate thought, though sometimes unknowingly. In this and more, my committee members Lynne Adrian and Philip Beidler, as well as my director Nikhil Bilwakesh, proved more than just readers. Specifically, Dr. Adrian pointed me to Higginson's collection of spirituals, and Dr. Beidler urged me to pursue wartime connections between Dickinson and Higginson.

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INTRODUCTION

A divine person is the prophecy of the mind; a friend is the hope of the heart.

—Emerson

“The whole truth of Emily Dickinson will elude us always; she seems almost willfully to have seen to that,” writes Dickinson’s first major biographer Richard Sewall (668). Literary critic Alfred Kazin similarly asserts, “She unsettles, most obviously, by not being easily locatable” (164). Agreement about Dickinson’s work and life mostly stems from this truth: she is difficult to pin down. Her metaphors shift; her poetry relies on a vocabulary entirely her own; she capitalizes words seemingly at random; ‘it’s’ means ‘its.’¹ And these are just a few of the baffling (and sometimes annoying) features of her poetry—the mysteries of her life are just as plentiful.

We imagine that if we knew more about her life, then we might better understand her poetry. Just in the past couple of years two new Dickinson biographies have been published: in 2010 Lyndall Gordon’s *Lives Like Loaded Guns* and in 2009 Brenda Wineapple’s *White Heat*, an account of the friendship between Dickinson and Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Wineapple’s biography provides the point of departure for this study. As Wineapple elucidates, Higginson—and his work—have been dismissed for too long. At last it is time to take him seriously.

¹ In my quotation of Dickinson’s poetry in this thesis, I indulge her erratic spelling and punctuation except in the most extreme cases.

Higginson has not received much scholarly attention in part perhaps because he has been portrayed as simple, settled, un-elusive. The first anthology of his writing was just published in 2000, *The Magnificent Activist*. In the introduction Howard Meyer argues Higginson's writing "should be read for the sheer joy of reading itself, and his works should be respected enough to serve as models for teaching writing to both writers and students generally" (1). John T. Bethell observes that Higginson has "something meaningful to say to our times" (qtd. in Meyer 3). As we examine Higginson's writing as meaningful on its own terms, we get a fuller picture of the friend and reader Dickinson found in Higginson.

This study turns on the idea of unlikely friendships. In this sense Emily Dickinson and Thomas Wentworth Higginson might serve as one example of a friendship (in the context of reform and literature) that crosses the boundaries of gender in nineteenth-century America: Angelina Grimké, Sarah Grimké and Theodore Weld, Lucretia Mott and Higginson, Ida B. Wells and Albion Winegar Tourgée, are examples of some others, though certainly even these are only representative. Broadly speaking, what the relationship between Dickinson and Higginson helps to show is that reformers engaged in friendships that preceded their time.

In this regard, Dickinson and Higginson serve as an instance of a relationship that recasts sex relations in nineteenth-century America. John Stauffer, in *The Black Hearts of Men*, illustrates how James McCune Smith, Gerrit Smith, Frederick Douglass, and John Brown "embraced an ethic of a black heart" to forge "interracial bonds of friendship that were unprecedented in their own time and were probably not duplicated into well into the twentieth century" (1). Beyond an 'ethic of a black heart,' the friendships shared between the men and women I mention above could illustrate that race was not the only barrier reformers crossed in this period. While Stauffer shows how reformers "transformed themselves and overcame existing social barriers, they reimagined their country as a pluralist society in which the standard of excellence depended on righteousness and benevolence

rather than on skin color, sex, or material wealth,” friendships between men and women can extend his argument beyond skin color to include sex.

Emily Dickinson and Thomas Wentworth Higginson provide just one example of a nineteenth-century friendship that recasts sex relations to reenvision not just their country, but their world: in their letters the two reimagine their country in the context of the known world and one to come, “Immortality,” as Dickinson puts it.² Dickinson, of course, does not participate in political reform efforts, nor does she ever explicitly show an interest in activists’ causes. Thus she and Higginson cross yet another boundary: in this case one of political and social engagement. Higginson, member of the Secret Six and one who broke down a courthouse door to rescue a fugitive slave, represents radical reform politics where Dickinson’s politics remain a vexing question. Her views on human rights are conservative at best, embarrassing at worst. From their disparate political views, we can further see the two cross boundaries of genre: for the reformer, speeches, essays, pamphlets, sermons provide suitable forms, though Higginson never settled into one. Dickinson, even in her letters, often bursts into verse, poetry her haven no matter who she spoke with.

Since prophetic discourse can emerge in any genre, the prophet serves as a crucial lens in considering their exchange. Since both Dickinson and Higginson emerge both within and against nineteenth-century evangelical Christianity, the Biblical prophet and the prophet as preacher serve as useful lenses.³ In the Judeo-Christian tradition, “prophets are people who are divinely inspired to speak their vision. Not satisfied with the mere practice of religion, prophets—both those of the

² Since 1933 when Gilbert Barnes traced the religious roots of the abolition crusade, scholarship has focused on religion and class, then religion and gender. The current emphasis on religion and gender remains limited because “it downplays the diverse aspects of self and behavior” (Stauffer). For this reason I chose to narrow my focus to one friendship so that I might attend to the selves and behavior of two most unique individuals.

³ Also, as Jack L. Capps points out, Dickinson cites prophetic books of the Bible most frequently: Revelation, Isaiah, the Psalms and the Gospels.

Bible and many preachers of Dickinson's day, who saw themselves as extending the scriptural tradition—speak a message of spiritual vitality, challenging empty rituals and hollow religiosity” (Dorani 27-28). Together, Dickinson and Higginson overturn empty rituals and expose ‘dead’ doctrines, Dickinson through verse and correspondence, Higginson through his life of actively engaging in reform efforts.

From one perspective, the friendship of Dickinson and Higginson does not burn brightly. The two saw each other in person only twice, once in 1870 and for a final time in 1874. I do not claim their friendship is characterized by burning intensity. The friendship the two share reflects Emerson's theory that “[t]he condition that high friendship demands is the ability to do without it” (350). If we then think of a friend as “Janus-faced: he looks to the past and the future. He is the child of all my foregoing hours, the prophet of those to come, and the harbinger of a greater friend,” then the friendship becomes an example of the ‘high’ friendship (Emerson 353). Beyond this idea of a ‘high friendship,’ I intend to explore the question: *why* this man? Higginson remains an unusual correspondent for Dickinson and because he has been derided so frequently, we are only beginning to understand the significance of his role in her life and work and the significance of his life and work on its own terms.

Since I am primarily concerned with the question of why Dickinson chose this very passionate public figure, I focus a great deal on their invocation and collective reinterpretation of various strands of nineteenth-century theology. My claim, in Chapter 1, is that the two come together out of a desire to freely express belief. Beyond their mutual interest in religious expression, Dickinson becomes more closely connected both to the war efforts and to the larger project of social reform in New England. Throughout their correspondence, Dickinson and Higginson address questions of loss and life, and how to entwine the suffering of the world they can see with an understanding of one to come, an “Immortality.” By attending to their employment of tropes of

time and loss in wartime letters, poems, and essays, I connect their dialectic of time and loss to the larger context of the United States at war.

In Chapter 2, I examine Higginson's writings, many of which have received little if any scholarly attention, in conversation with Dickinson's poetry. While in Chapter 1 I focus on how their lives intersect through letters, in Chapter 2 I attend to the intersections of their non-epistolary writings. Since Higginson is, after all, one of the first and only readers of Dickinson's poetry during the nineteenth-century, I further examine Higginson's work in light of Dickinson's verse. Higginson's references and responses, implicit and explicit, to Dickinson's poems illustrate that her thought found its way to public audiences through their friendship.

In the pages that follow I argue that the odd relationship shared between Higginson—a symbol of the public, the political, the rhetorical—and Dickinson—a stark image of the private, the personal, the poetic—illustrates the power of spiritualized friendships within nineteenth-century America to cross the lines of gender, politics, and genre. Together the poet and the rhetorician conceived again and again of the flood subject, Immortality.

CHAPTER 1

“A Little Tinctured with Radicalism”: Abandoning the Pulpit and the Seminary

Not knowing when Herself may come
I open every Door,
Or has she Feathers, like a Bird,
Or Billows, like a Shore –
– Emily Dickinson,
enclosed in a letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson,
dated spring 1886

To my friend I write a letter, and from him I receive a letter. That seems to you a little. It suffices me. It is a spiritual gift worthy of him to give, and of me to receive. It profanes nobody. In these warm lines the heart will trust itself, as it will not the tongue, and pour out the prophecy of a godlier existence than all the annals of heroism have yet made good. –Emerson

“An empty pulpit can speak more loudly than a live minister”: A Gesture toward the State of Affairs in 1848

“Thanksgiving morning 1848,” admonished Thomas Wentworth Higginson, “must be mingled with repentance.” Higginson chose Thanksgiving as the occasion to preach his feverish sermon, entitled “Not by Bread Alone,” to his congregation at the First Religious Society of Newburyport, located thirty-eight miles north of Boston. Increasingly annoyed by his parishioners’ apathy toward slavery, materialism, and most recently, their support for and election of Whig candidate Zachary Taylor, Higginson would be quiet no more. “This one great reason stood, and forever will stand in history, underlying all, overtopping all—this—that slavery or no slavery, consistency or no consistency, honor or dishonor, that spirit in the Northern people, which lives ‘by

bread alone' has secured its PROTECTIVE TARIFF!" (Edelstein 89). For this, Higginson charged, they should repent.

This sermon, by far Higginson's most censorious and most radical in his congregation's eyes, caused "quite a little commotion" and cemented his parishioners' discontent with his radical politics (Edelstein 92). Not a year later, in September 1849, he resigned from his two-year stint as minister, claiming no wrong had been essayed against him but instead "against truth and light" (93). At his resignation ceremony, in an effort to keep his resignation amiable and mollify antagonism, Higginson addressed the congregation in broad brushstrokes, excoriating himself this time instead of his audience: his radical self, his only shame, specifically, his refusal to swallow his fervent position "on a certain topic of practical morality" (94). Higginson was a reformer, and he couldn't keep himself from reforming others. He left the pulpit for a life where reform, and truth and light, might be seen as one rather than separate beliefs.

Higginson blamed his failure as a minister on institutional religion rather than anything specific. "O Christian Church, it is better to be alone than with those whom there is no tie of spirit," wrote Higginson to Samuel Johnson, a friend from Harvard Divinity School (qtd. in Edelstein 94). A carpenter in the church, however, accredited the trouble to Higginson being "too much of a reformer." "This has always been a very pro-slavery society, and it was always strange to me how a man so strongly imbued with anti-slavery sentiments and others of a similar kind, should be permitted to settle there at all" (qtd. in Edelstein 94). The problem, then, was two-fold: neither Higginson, nor his church, could disentangle the reform of the world from their beliefs about one to come.

Upon leaving the church of the New Religious Society, the young Higginson and his wife Mary Ellery Channing, moved to the outskirts of Newburyport. Outside the church and removed from reform efforts, Higginson wrote in his journal, "I often feel suffocated inwardly—and I want

to push away the side of the house & scream in the open air, but instead sit in silence and apparent coldness to conceal my sighs and tears” (99). Early in his career he recognized that retreat would suffocate him. His only escape from the ills he felt within was a public life of reform in the Emersonian sense, to remake what others had made.

* * * * *

Thanksgiving of 1848, seventeen-year old Emily Dickinson was in Amherst, Massachusetts, home from her year at Mount Holyoke Seminary. Earlier during the year, Dickinson wrote to close friend Abiah Root: “I have neglected *one thing needful* when all were obtaining it, & I may never, never again pass through such a season as was granted us last winter. Abiah, you may be surprised to hear me speak as I do . . . but I am not happy, and I regret that last term, when that golden opportunity was mine, I did not give up and become a Christian” (L, 23). Dickinson wished she could say she believed, but she resisted saying something she did not feel with full conviction.

Mount Holyoke Seminary, under the guidance of Mary Lyon, was emblazoned with opportunity for conversion. Dickinson, however, resisted the golden opportunity. She would not give up; she had “no hope.”

Mary Lyon, in her own words, viewed her seminary as training ground for “daughters [who] shall go forth . . . burning with a desire to bless mankind,” and was described by a colleague as one who “sought not merely [the students’] conversion, but their enlistment in the great work of saving a lost world. It was the end and aim of all her efforts to make the seminary a nursery of the church” (qtd. in Lundin 36). Accordingly, Lyon divided her students into categories to secure maximum efficacy in ensuring conversion. Three labels were applied to students: “No-Hopers,” “Hopers,” and “Christians.” “Christians” consisted of those who had already professed a belief in Christ and converted; “hoppers” were the young ladies who acknowledged themselves on the brink of conversion, and “no-hoppers,” the group to which Dickinson belonged, could not attest to believing

in Christ. Dickinson wrote, “There is a great deal of religious interest here and many are flocking to the ark of safety. I have not yet given up to the claim of Christ, but trust that I am not entirely thoughtless on so important & serious a subject” (*L*, 23). Dickinson, throughout her life, avoided “flocking,” particularly to any “ark of safety.” She preferred her own thoughts, dangerous and lonely as that destination might become.

May of 1848, Emily Dickinson wrote to her elder brother Austin, “I received a letter from home on Saturday, by Mr. Gilbert Smith and father wrote in it that he intended to send for Cousin Emily & myself on Saturday of this week to spend the Sabbath at home. I went to Miss Whitman, after receiving the letter & asked her if we could go if you decided to come for us. She seemed stunned by my request & could not find utterance to an answer for some time” (*L*, 125). Dickinson desired to leave Mount Holyoke Seminary for home in Amherst, Massachusetts, at the same time as Austin; however, seminary rules required no one leave the school on the Sabbath for “[t]he young ladies do not make or receive calls on the Sabbath. Neither should they spend a single Sabbath from the Seminary in term time. . . . The place of weekly labors is the most favorable spot for the scenes of the Sabbath” (Lundin 24). Institutional Christianity infuriated Dickinson, and as a result she remained obdurate against a savior who made such rigorous requirements of his people.

Dickinson closes the 1848 letter to Abiah Root in this way: “It is not now too late . . . , but it is hard for me to give up the world. . . . How I wish I could say that with sincerity, but I fear I never can” (*L*, 23).

“The hand you stretch me in the Dark”: The First Letter

1848 serves as the year of departure to emphasize the striking, and telling, similarity of circumstance in the lives of Dickinson and Higginson. Both struggled and resisted pressures imposed upon them in the religious fervor of New England, and as a result they emerged as believers on a search for a space to express and define belief in terms of their own choosing. “On

subjects of which we know nothing, or should I say *Beings* – is ‘Phil’ [Judge Lord] a ‘Being’ or a ‘Theme’ we both believe and disbelieve a hundred times an Hour, which keeps Believing nimble –” Dickinson penned in a draft of a letter to her friend Judge Otis Phillips Lord (*L*, 728).⁴

Dickinson refused conformity through her staunch resistance to conversion in the evangelical strictures outlined by Mary Lyon. Still, she desired immensely to believe in sincere terms, but for her, the sacrifice was too much. To believe in Lyon’s terms meant to “give up the world,” and that she could not do. Higginson, ironically, was just as fervid in his desire not to give up the world to appease his congregants at Newburyport. To believe, to him, meant to reform his world, and he felt this as sincerely as Dickinson felt she must resist institutional Christianity. As he writes to his wife, “I like to have full swing for my impulses. . . . I do not feel that I gain anything by any system not self-imposed” (*Letters and Journals* 456).

The relationship recorded in twenty-four years of letters between Emily Dickinson and Thomas Wentworth Higginson has generated much scholarly discussion and debate over the years. For so long Higginson remained a caricature who reflected all the faddish politics of his time: in the words of Henry James, he stood “on behalf of everything, almost, but especially of the negroes and the ladies” (qtd. in Wineapple 31). Besides his whimsical character, Higginson garnered much criticism for the “surgery” he performed on Dickinson’s poetry, and it cannot be ignored that as Dickinson’s literary mentor, he “was not an original but a derivative” (Buell 359).⁵

⁴ James McIntosh takes this quotation as the subject for his excellent study on Dickinson and religion: *Nimble Believing: Dickinson and the Unknown*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2000. He treats Dickinson’s poetic use of her “vacillations between doubt and faith” in relationship with other major artists of nineteenth-century American introspection, particularly Emerson, Thoreau and Melville.

⁵ For a recent account of Higginson as unfit preceptor, see MacKenzie, Cindy, “Emily Dickinson’s Epistolary Poetics,” *Reading Emily Dickinson’s Letters*, Eds. Jane Eberwein and Cindy MacKenzie, Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 2009, MacKenzie writes: “While Higginson may not have been her ideal reader. . . . Higginson’s ‘failure’ to read with a ‘rare Ear’ may have contributed to [Dickinson

However, as Brenda Wineapple recently illustrated, Higginson was more than Dickinson's inept preceptor; he was her friend. Undoubtedly by his first response Dickinson realized he misunderstood her project to a certain extent, in terms of manipulating form, but here I will suggest she was more interested in his response to the 'life' of her project than any meticulous discussion of formal poetics. Indeed, faddish politics and capriciousness aside, Higginson was "a true believer and, to put it in unfashionable terms, a very good man" (Wineapple 31). From Dickinson's point of view, as one whose project was reforming poetry, she inquired of Higginson of his place in society as a believer, not only of poetics: "Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is *alive*?" (L, 260 emphasis mine). Higginson knew of life; his very public, radical negotiation of sincere terms for belief marked him an apt interlocutor for Dickinson's equally private, radical remaking of religious imagery, forms, and doctrines.

As Wineapple's sympathetic account of the relationship between Dickinson and Higginson demonstrates, the time has come "to at last take Higginson as seriously as he deserves" (Habegger, "White Heat"). Higginson's role in the poet's life raises a series of questions that have long perplexed Dickinson scholars; one, as Alfred Habegger acutely observes, is "the difficult and irritating question of Emily Dickinson's politics" ("White Heat" 97).⁶ For example, supposing Dickinson's poetry derives its power in part from her tenacious isolation, then it appears "[n]othing would interest her less than political reform or social activism. Her work in life would be to attempt and achieve an unprecedented imaginative freedom while dwelling in what looks like a privileged capacity" (Habegger, *My Wars* 211). Still, Dickinson lived "in a time of major political, social,

s] development of a way of reading that is as radically innovative and daring as [her] ways of writing" (25). Even here, Higginson is regarded as no more than a barrier that Dickinson must hurdle.

⁶ Habegger continues: "The hidden subject that Wineapple has not worked hard enough to unwrap, and that cries out for attention in a book that rightly honors the man who helped organize the first regiment of ex-slaves, is the poet's views on reform and human rights" ("White Heat" 97). I take these issues up more explicitly in chapter 2.

religious, and epistemological breakdown, perhaps best signified by the political collapse, blood violence, and on-going social questions raised by the Civil War” (Erkkila 144). In this light, Dickinson may be viewed as a poet who “turned to writing not as a retreat into privacy but as a higher order of culture and a powerful means of talking back to, with, and against her democratic age” (Erkkila 144).⁷

Specifically she talked back to, with, and against Higginson, one who did in fact play a central role in her democratic age. Also Dickinson wrote almost half her oeuvre during the years of the Civil War: the view of the poet as strictly apolitical forgets Dickinson’s obsession with death during an era inundated with blood violence in the name of peace, and it certainly misses the influence of her friend, Colonel Higginson. The probing question of the politics of Emily Dickinson may be elucidated through careful attention to the interconnectedness of her own life to that of the very public, very political Higginson. In this chapter, I claim that if we understand Higginson as a spiritual friend to Dickinson, as well as literary mentor, then Dickinson becomes more closely connected both to the war efforts and to the larger project of social reform in New England. Throughout their correspondence, Dickinson and Higginson address questions of loss and life, and how to entwine the suffering of the world they can see with an understanding of one to come, an “Immortality.”⁸ This connection, deeply spiritual, through a friendship of letters further raises

⁷ Arguments about Dickinson’s political views often cite her aphorism, “George who?” as evidence she was essentially apolitical. See Madsen, Catherine, “Go Above Your Nerve,” *Parnassus*, 31.1 (2009): 237-246, for a recent rehearsal of this claim.

⁸ In “‘Fascination’ is absolute of Clime’ Reading Dickinson’s Correspondence with Higginson as Naturalist,” *The Emily Dickinson Journal*, 14.2 (2005): 103-119, Midori Asahina notes that Dickinson appeals to Higginson “to authorize her project of working for ‘immortality’” (106). Asahina focuses on a ‘literal’ immortality, which she argues can be seen in Dickson’s attraction to the transcendental philosophy that art and the marketplace are irreconcilable. While Dickinson’s isolation from the literary marketplace cannot be disputed, my reading of her correspondence with Higginson parts from the naturalist emphasis to examine religious elements. Asahina goes on to argue, “[I]t is clear that in asking for his instruction, Dickinson was appealing to Higginson not as activist but as a naturalist” (110). Here I aim to complicate this reading of their correspondence. In recognizing the

questions about the relationship between the rhetorician and the private poet: specifically what power does the poetry penned safely away from the public throes of social reform in late nineteenth-century America hold?

At home in Amherst, we have Emily Dickinson, who stands for the most private of artists, confined not only from the influence of society but also from the pressures of the marketplace. Higginson, by contrast, was a rhetorician, and in that role he embodies the inverse: his life and his writing aimed to influence society directly and because of this he was implicit in the power structures of nineteenth-century society. In the post-Romantic division of poetic and rhetoric, the poet has held the superior status, seen as more influential because she seemingly lives and works outside dominant power structures (Berlin 3). Considering the private poet and democracy, for example, Wayne Koestenbaum writes, “What are the ramifications, for democracy, of Dickinson’s adventures with punctuation and pause? This: to pause is to abolish doctrinal solidity; poetry should puncture our life with pauses from which questions, uncertainties, and disavowals might flower” (307). In this regard Dickinson’s work acquires “political vitality because of its disregard for audience” (Koestenbaum 303). Historically rhetoric has been understood as the opposite of this, as rhetoric entails an attempt to persuade an audience. However, this distinction—poetic and rhetoric—long undergirds the scholarly dismissal of Higginson.⁹ In seeking to reexamine the friendship he shares with Dickinson, we see a lively friendship between poetic and rhetoric: her poems become a source

ways their relationship moves beyond the bounds of literary preceptor and into the realm of friendship, it is possible to see how Dickinson appeals to Higginson as activist, naturalist, husband, father, etc, as friendship does not entail only the element of self readily apparent in one’s writings.

⁹ I do not have the space to take this argument up here, but the views of Dickinson and Higginson reflect the configuration of English studies in the twentieth century. As James Berlin writes, “[F]or English studies, all that is important and central in the study of discourse falls within the domain of literary texts and all that is unimportant and marginal falls within the realm of rhetoric. The result has been singular. . . . the rhetorical text has been relegated to the limbo of first-year composition, a course offered only because of the alleged failure of the high school to do its job in what is now designated a ‘lower’ level of study” (3).

of encouragement to his public life, and his public life an inspiration to her poetry. Dickinson's role as private poetic activist, reformer of language, beset on capturing the world she could not give up, then, mirrors Higginson's role as public social activist in ways that suggest reform in nineteenth-century America had the power to balance the distinction between poetry and rhetoric.

Here I argue Higginson and Dickinson provocatively illustrate the power of a friendship between the private poet at her home and the reformer in the midst of society. As we better understand Higginson's role—as the colonel, the reformer, the ex-minister, and the revolutionary—in Dickinson's life, Dickinson's ties to the world beyond Amherst, Massachusetts, come more clearly into focus. Further her poetry takes on new life—political life—that speaks directly to a most political audience. She and he together enact reform, as they argue for democracy in their own disparate terms; Dickinson writing poems and letters, and letter-poems, inventing form and interrogating the limits of language from her haven in Amherst, and Higginson, writing essays, novels, poems, histories, letters, speeches, never settling in his struggle for a suitable form, yet the political vitality of his work rests, like Dickinson's, in a blatant disregard for audience: “Not by Bread Alone” serving as a case and point.

In April of 1862, Higginson received a request from the young rebel. In the first, now famous, letter Dickinson inquires of Higginson to tell her if her “Verse is alive”: “Should you think it breathed – and had the leisure to tell me, I should feel quick gratitude— . . . I enclose my name – asking you, if you please – Sir – to tell me what is true?” (*L*, 260).¹⁰ Already, the pattern of their correspondence emerges: “breath,” “quick,” “leisure,” tropes signifying Dickinson's deep concerns of employing, and manipulating, time to absorb her inability to reconcile her religious heritage with

¹⁰ For decades now scholars have assumed Dickinson's letter responds to the piece Higginson published in *The Atlantic*, “Letter to a Young Contributor”; for an alternate view, see Meyer, Howard, *The Magnificent Activist: The Writings of Thomas Wentworth Higginson*, especially ps. 27-30.

her own burgeoning beliefs, and the subsequent doubts that emerge from such a quest. Take for example one of the four poems included in this first letter:

The nearest dream recedes – unrealized –
The heaven we chase –
Like the June Bee – before the School Boy –
Invites the race –
Stoops – to an easy Clover –
Dips – evades – teases – deploys –
Then – to the Royal Clouds
Lifts his light Pinnacle –
Heedless of the Boy –
Staring – bewildered – at the mocking sky –

Homesick for the steadfast Honey –
Ah – the Bee flies not
That brews that rare variety! (Fr 304)¹¹

Like much of Dickinson's poetry, this one engages her "flood subject," immortality, signified here by the "June Bee" that dips, evades, teases, and ultimately, deploys.¹² Like the letter in which it was enclosed, immediacy is conveyed through rhythm and metaphor. The speaker of this poem observes that as one pursues heaven, it vanishes. The bee, a recurring image in Dickinson's poetry, serves as a

¹¹ In the line of Judith Farr and Martha Nell Smith, I read Dickinson's poetry rhetorically, that is through a reconstruction of the worldly context in which poems first appeared. Since my purpose here is to extend the link between Dickinson and Higginson, I am particularly concerned with their effect on him within the context of their friendship. For other rhetorically-focused readings of Dickinson's corpus see: *The Passion of Emily Dickinson* and *Rowing in Eden: Rereading Emily Dickinson*.

¹² Dickinson would later write to Higginson: "You mention Immortality. That is the Flood subject" (*L*, 319).

conceit for heaven. The last three lines of this particular poem rupture the conceit; the exhale, “Ah,” implies “found at last,” and instead the line surprises with a coup de grace—such a bee “flies not.” Does Dickinson inquire of Higginson to aid her in the quest the speaker relinquishes?

Unfortunately Higginson’s response to Dickinson no longer exists. From her second letter we ascertain he offered her criticisms that she compares to a “surgery” that “was not so painful as [she] supposed” (*L*, 261). Their correspondence continued, at varying intervals, for the next twenty-four years, until Dickinson’s death in 1886.

For the first eight years the friendship took place only through their letters, until 1870 when the two first met in person. Of the meeting Higginson remembers Dickinson divulged, “I never knew how to tell time by the clock till I was 15. My father thought he had taught me but I did not understand & I was afraid to ask any one else lest he should know” (*L*, 342b). Early in life Dickinson learned to set her own time.

In an essay simply titled, “Emily Dickinson,” Higginson recalls that first meeting this way: “I have tried to describe her just as she was, with the aid of notes taken at the time; but this interview left our relation very much what it was before; —on my side an interest that was strong and even affectionate, but not based on any thorough comprehension; and on her side a hope, always rather baffled, that I should afford some aid in solving her abstruse problem of life” (“Dickinson” 559). Even years after her death, Higginson did not pretend to understand either Dickinson or the relationship they shared. He was content to acknowledge their relationship rested on hope aided by mystery:

Hope is a strange invention
A Patent of the Heart – In unremitting action
Yet never wearing out –
Of this electric adjunct

Not anything is known (Fr 1424)

What she asked of him, he could never ever adequately articulate. Perhaps this is the nature of her hope.

“Life is death we’re lengthy at”: Poetic Renderings of Grief

Hope in the unknown, about the unknown, in the face of the unknown: over the twenty-four years of their correspondence, these tropes continue to emerge. As Dickinson writes to Higginson of loss, of corporeal suffering, of grief, she asks of him to help her create an “Immortality” she can believe will absorb her “abstruse problem of life,” that is, one not identical to the evangelical heaven proposed to her by her Calvinist heritage. Higginson, as he recalls in the passage cited in the previous section, recognizes these were the pressing matters she wished to discuss with him. He offered her a partner in her restive, inexhaustible discussion of the relationship of a known life to one that might come next. The conversation’s origins are religious, but not one with the questions circulating widely in nineteenth-century society. Nina Baym notes, for example, “Ultimately, to Dickinson as to so many in her era and perhaps in ours as well, religion is ultimately about the promise of some kind of afterlife, and the afterlife reduces to the promise of reunion with the beloved dead” (135). However, while religion, for Dickinson and for Higginson, was certainly about a promise of an afterlife, their version of it entailed much more than a reunion with the dead: it was ultimately about infinite time and space “to live” freed from the grief and suffering of existence on earth. The Immortality they imagined could not be reduced to a reunion with the dead because it was inextricably linked with life on earth: “Who has not found the Heaven—below—/Will fail of it above” (Fr 1609). As the speaker of Dickinson’s poem articulates, the afterlife she and Higginson envision touches life on earth: Suffering made true by Revelation.

Dickinson and Higginson begin their friendship of letters in the midst of the Civil War; suffering and loss become inevitable subjects. Their dialect of loss and time by turns illustrates how

the mystery and impotence surrounding grief functions politically, albeit privately. Judith Butler's "Violence, Mourning, Politics" reminds us, "To grieve, and to make grief itself into a resource for politics, is not to be resigned to inaction, but it may be understood as the slow process by which we develop a point of identification with suffering itself. The disorientation of grief—"Who have I become?" or indeed, "What is left of me?" "What is it in the Other that I have lost?" posits the I in the mode of unknowingness" (30). To render poetically this disorientation, to allow it to remake an understanding of earthly suffering in an eternally set time, were the issues at hand between Dickinson and Higginson early in their friendship.

Since grief by definition posits one in a mode of unknowing, the work of the poet is to acquaint us with such an experience. Within the exchange of letters penned while Higginson commanded the first regiment of emancipated slaves, Dickinson writes through her grief to make the disorientation palpable. When Higginson was wounded in battle in 1863, for example, Dickinson writes:

Are you in danger . . . I wish to see you more than before you failed – Will you tell
me your health? I am surprised and anxious, since receiving your note –

The only News I know

Is bulletins all day

From Immortality (*L*, 290)

Characteristic of Dickinson she manipulates popular perceptions of religious themes: a play on Gospel 'News' here suggests she is preoccupied with literal reports of deaths. Grief obviously raises her ultimate question: how does one get from known 'News' to the unknown, 'Immortality'? Beyond her reassertion of these themes in response to her anxiety about death, this missive illustrates the level of affection and concern Dickinson felt for Higginson, and it also connects her worries for him to the larger issue of the Civil War itself. Dickinson was not, as was long assumed,

oblivious to the war being fought. After her brother Austin's close friend Frazer Stearns was claimed by war in 1862, she writes, "Sorrow seems more general than it did, and not the estate of a few persons, since the war began; and if the anguish of others helped one with one's own, now would be many medicines" (*L*, 286).¹³ Dickinson experiences the suffering associated with the war acutely, and she offers her theory that communal grief—shared suffering—might offer healing. As a poet she offers such medicine through metaphor to one who physically suffered in the war: Higginson.

Commenting on Dickinson's role in Civil War America, David S. Reynolds suggests she may be linked to another rebel, John Brown:

We know that Emily rebelled against her stodgy father and mother in many ways, forging a lawbreaking poetry that took the restrictive hymn structure of her childhood and burst it with shocking metaphors and subversive ideas. Was she following the lead of the era's most famous lawbreaker, the ultimate rebel against corruption and compromise, an inspired criminal who, she knew, her father hated and who could thus shape her own private rebellion? (450)

Reynolds' connection between Brown and Dickinson remains inconclusive, but what we do know is that the radical, rebellious Higginson's role in the Secret Six drew the poet that much closer to belief in militant abolitionism, and to the root of the Civil War. Higginson, the man who "more than

¹³ In a 1962 study of Civil War literature, Edmund Wilson, for example, argues that Dickinson is both "overrated" and that she never refers to the Civil War in her poems. In 1965 Thomas Ford was the first to select poems as directly commenting on the war, and Shira Wolosky's *Emily Dickinson: A Voice of War* expands on Ford's idea, illustrating, for example, how Dickinson's poem "My Triumph lasted till the Drums" employs war as a means to understand a struggle with religion. For a recent discussion of Dickinson's role as a war poet, see Friedlander, Benjamin, "Emily Dickinson and the Battle of Ball's Bluff," *PMLA* (Winter 2009): 1582-1599. Friedlander illustrates that the inclusion of Dickinson in three recent anthologies of American war poetry "signals a new consensus regarding her place in the canon of Civil War writing" (1582). He goes on to argue that scholars have largely missed the discordant character of Dickinson's response to the war through efforts to "smooth away its internal contradictions or reconcile its divergent tendencies in single explanatory ways" (1583).

anyone else, had carried forward John Brown's Abolitionist spirit," was Dickinson's closest tie to the battlefield (450). Significantly, Dickinson's first letter to Higginson was written after his public support of John Brown. Undoubtedly Dickinson grew increasingly aware that during this era "a soldier was five times more likely to die than if he had not entered the army" (Faust xiii). When she writes, "The only News I know," she means she hears again and again of the deaths of men at war; she fears for Higginson because she has witnessed the effects of war personally.

Earlier in 1863, when Dickinson first discovered Higginson had gone to South Carolina as colonel, she writes: "I did not deem that Planetary forces annulled – but suffered an Exchange of Territory, or World – I should have liked to see you, before you became improbable. War feels to me an oblique place –" (280). While Dickinson considers the verity of death during wartimes, her conception of time expands and contracts by turns. At once she references "Planetary forces" and "Exchange of Territory, or World," and then considers war that "oblique place." Considering her terrestrial references, we might assume by "oblique" she means "not one with the horizon, not at right angles to the equator or axis of the celestial sphere, meaning that the apparent course of a celestial object that is inclined at an angle to the horizon which is not a right angle" (*OED* "oblique" I.2.a). Oblique means other worldly, beyond vision. While oblique serves a trope for the unknown, it suggests if the light shifts, one might access the experience. The prophet, as one who sees what others cannot, may already have access to what seems oblique.

War is not easily accessible; it is outside of Dickinson's world. This letter, then, illustrates how beyond Higginson's role as Dickinson's tie to society, his public life invigorates her poetic endeavor. Obliqueness is, after all, part of her project. In the 1862 poem "There's a certain Slant of light" we see how her poetic philosophy turns on revelation gained through indirection and the unexpected:

There's a certain Slant of light,

Winter Afternoons –
That oppresses, like the Heft
Of Cathedral Tunes –

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us –
We can find no scar,
But internal difference –
Where the Meanings, are –

None may teach it – Any –
'Tis the Seal Despair –
An imperial affliction
Sent us of the Air –

When it comes, the Landscape listens –
Shadows – hold their breath –
When it goes, 'tis like the Distance
On the look of Death – (Fr 320)

Death, despair, time, slanted light: the speaker here illustrates how the image of war undergirds Dickinson's understanding of revelation, of what poetic utterance can articulate. War, as an oblique place, appears behind the speaker's definition of what "a certain Slant of light" can show: the speaker cannot find it, she only knows what she can see when it appears. The conflagration of bodies during the war seems to Dickinson beyond what she has either seen or experienced, thus her

friendship with the colonel, in part, encourages her to expand her metaphors to account for what she is unable to reconcile. What she does not experience she feels through affection for Higginson.

In the first war letter, she goes on, “I found you were gone, by accident, as I find Systems are, or Seasons of the year, and obtain no cause – but suppose it a treason of Progress – that dissolves as it goes. Carlo – still remained – and I told him – Best Gains – must have the Losses’ Test/ – To constitute them Gains –/” (*L*, 280). Thus she draws the conceit out, such an “oblique war” moves between the motions and passing of earthly time and place; Higginson now has disappeared there. In the lines she includes as speech to her beloved dog Carlo, Dickinson seeks solace from the possibility of the loss of Higginson’s life, which causes her to recall other friends’ deaths; they, “striking sharp and early, for I held them since – in a brittle love – of more alarm, than peace,” remind her, “Life is death we’re lengthy at, death the hinge to life” (*L*, 280, 281). The alarm and strike of loss that brings grief in its wake provides the poet with a potent test unlike any of the world she sees. Grief invites her play with paradox: inured love, treason of Progress, and finally Losses’ Test: this is Dickinson at her best, the poet reminding the colonel at war that the seeming finality of loss bears an unseen element, only made known through metaphor.

Presumably for encouragement to her friend, Dickinson enclosed in this missive the poem:

The Soul unto itself
Is an imperial friend—
Or the most agonizing Spy –
An enemy could send –
Secure against it’s own –
No treason it can fear –
Itself – its Sovereign – Of itself
The Soul should stand in Awe – (579)

This poem deals in duplicity: While Dickinson confronted the timely issue of the impending death of her friend Higginson during the war, she considered the timeless issue of the battles of the soul life's greatest question. Further, it would appear, she intends this poem as encouragement to the colonel while he confronts his own imminent death and that of his troops: he may be fearless, for his own "Sovereign Soul" is at rest. The liberty of the individual soul, Dickinson knows, is Higginson's most resolute cause and deepest belief.

Two other lines are included within the body of the letter: "Not 'Revelation' – 'tis – that waits,/ But our unfurnished eyes –" (290). Like "The Soul unto itself" these lines illustrate Dickinson's compulsion to inflect eternity as she seeks comfort for herself and Higginson while his life hangs in the balance. Scholars have long noted the importance of the book of Revelation to Dickinson, and she repeatedly asserts her preference for it. Early in their correspondence, when Higginson inquires what she reads, "the Revelations," is among the list (though many of the other works appear to be mentioned to appease Higginson). Later too she writes, "Enough is so vast a sweetness I suppose it never occurs – only pathetic counterfeits – Fabulous to me as the men of the Revelations who 'shall not hunger any more.' Even the Possible has its insoluble particle" (*L*, 352).

Her reference to Revelation and 'unfurnished eyes' reveal the comfort she offers Higginson, but it also establishes a significant theme in their friendship: discussion of Scripture's message concerning 'Immortality.' Here, Dickinson returns to the theme of 'oblique places' to suggest books do not change as one's ability to see does. Spiritual blindness appeals to Dickinson since she dealt at times with her own physical eye troubles. In this war letter Higginson's corporeality triggers the juxtaposition of unrevealed time, 'waiting,' and what Dickinson sees as grace: eyes privy to what will be revealed after death. She signs the letter with a request: "Could you, with honor, avoid death, I entreat you, sir—It would bereave Your Gnome" (290). Even as she divulges all the comfort she knows, she desires to see her friend once more.

Dickinson preferred the prophetic books of the Bible, in part, because prophets see by slants of light. Their visions reveal oblique places. John's vision in Revelation 21, the second to last chapter in the Bible, provides Dickinson with her theory of grief and war in relationship to Immortality:

And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea. And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any pain: for the former things are passed away. (21.1-4)¹⁴

This passage, and the book of Revelation, engage past and future: heaven and earth become one. Immortality, then, is not reduced to reunion with dead: it is about not giving up the world, earth, for heaven. This vision provides Dickinson with that assurance, though it exists only in the unknown: the sight of the prophet. Just after John's vision, he records the words of God: "And he that sat upon the throne said, 'Behold, I make all things new.' And he said unto me, 'Write: for these words are true and faithful' " (21.5). I will return to the theme of 'adorning truth' in chapter 2, but for now the significance rests in what it means for the 'life' Dickinson sought in Higginson. For Dickinson, whose vocation as a poet entailed recording another version of a world, her references to Revelation in their correspondence remind him of her project, and of what she wanted: she asks him to confirm that her version of the vision is "faithful and true": does it breathe new life?¹⁵

¹⁴ Throughout I refer to the King James Version of the Bible, as it is Dickinson's preferred text.

¹⁵ For a discussion of Revelation and the vocation of the poet, see Norris, Kathleen, "A Story with Dragons: The Book of Revelation," *The Cloister Walk*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1987.

Even after the war ends, Dickinson and Higginson's correspondence continues to turn on grief—What is left of me? What is it in the Other that I have lost? Her letters illustrate her attempt to answer these questions with time: Revelation holds the answer. Increasingly, her focus becomes eschatological as she continues to write to Higginson after the war has ended. For example in 1869, Dickinson sends Higginson a letter theorizing the 'risks of Immortality.' She writes:

The Riddle that we guess
We speedily despise –
Not anything is stale so long
As Yesterday's Surprise –
The risks of Immortality are perhaps its charm – A secure Delight suffers in
enchantment – (*L*, 353)

In this missive, five years past the final shot of the Civil War, Dickinson still engages Higginson in her project of interweaving the world she can see with the one she cannot. While the suffering and the losses that occurred during the war proved pivotal for their friendship, theorizing about grief and desire remains her project. In the passage quoted above, Dickinson links opposites: yesterday with Immortality; charm with suffering; and security with surprise. Reworking opposites into relationship parallels the vision of the book of Revelation: earth and heaven can become one. Suffering can be overturned. For the present moment—'today'—Dickinson turns everything else on its head. Her vision is surprise; disruption are her eyes.

Besides union of opposites, in this letter Dickinson returns to another trusted trope: 'news.' In this case, news does not receive a capital letter but 'Time' does. Where before 'News' reported

death, ‘Time’ precedes ‘news’ both within the line and in significance.¹⁶ While Revelation ostensibly appears in the last line of this quatrain, the first one alludes to Genesis, ‘Dust.’ Dickinson unites the beginning with the end—opposites together again—but she does so in the context of Scripture, here symbolized by ‘news.’ She asserts that Scripture can only be understood in the context of its final vision:

The Spirit said unto the Dust
Old Friend, thou knewest me
And Time went out to tell the news
Unto Eternity (Fr 353)

Her focus asserts the relationship of opposites within the context of a Scriptural vision. Scripture itself, though, is superseded by the vision. The prophetic remembrance and reassertion of the Bible—from Adam’s creation in dust to the final Eternal proclamation of John—takes its power from the eschatological focus rather than from the text itself.

In the final quatrain written in the body of this letter, Dickinson draws the three disparate poems together. Suffering and anguish appear, except now “Time” is juxtaposed against a featherless “anguish”:

Too happy Time dissolves itself
And leaves no remnant by –
‘Tis anguish not a feather hath
Or too much weight to fly – (Fr 353)

Where the first passage linked opposites, and the second placed the ‘news’ in the context of revealed time, this passage connects both themes for a final vision entailing opposites brought together in an

¹⁶ Locating Dickinson’s metaphors or tracing them proves futile, as many Dickinson scholars have noted. Here I am interested in the evolution of her thought as it pertains to the friendship with Higginson.

'eternal' time. Time flies forward presumably softened and weightless with joy, where grief remains heavy and tangible to Dickinson. Through personification of 'Time,' Dickinson sets earthly time to anguish. To the questions of grief, she responds: not yet.

While these disjointed verses explore the relationship of earth to Immortality as an answer to grief, Dickinson's poem "As imperceptibly as Grief" draws them together. She sends the poem to Higginson in the spring of 1866:

As imperceptibly as Grief
The Summer lapsed away –
Too imperceptible at last
To seem like Perfidy –
A Quietness distilled
As Twilight long begun,
Or Nature spending with herself
Sequestered Afternoon –
The Dusk drew earlier in –
The Morning foreign shone –
A courteous, yet harrowing Grace,
As Guest, that would be gone –
And thus, without a Wing
Or service of a Keel
Our Summer made her light escape
Into the Beautiful – (Fr 935)

Here we see the poetic transformation of Dickinson's thought, as the speaker of this poem compares the passing of grief to the passing of a summer. Like the earlier letter, the speaker's

resolution keeps the earthly time and grief together, as one magnifies the mystery of the other. The final similarity, then, occurs in the final quatrain, when summer vanishes without a wing or keel; like the reference to anguish in the letter, time dissolves “as imperceptibly as grief”—without a feather to uphold it.

“There Was No World”: Time Set by Immortality

The book of Revelation entails past and future at once: heaven makes earth new. This paradoxical relationship not only undergirds Dickinson’s understanding of grief, and the questions she poses to Higginson, but it provides the lens through which she comes to understand and keep time in her verse. Barton Levi St. Armand notes that, “like most romantics, Dickinson was obsessed with the idea of time” (277). Dickinson’s sense of time, emphatically eschatological, suggests that she understands it as she does grief. The first two lines of “As imperceptibly as Grief” illustrate the link: the mystery of grief provides the trope not only for looking forward—Revelation—but for looking backward as well. For Dickinson, the impotence of earthly grief mirrors the impotence of earthly time, just as revelation fulfills both.

In thesis VI of Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” he tells us that to articulate the past historically means “to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger” (257). Such an articulation “grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one” creating the present as “the ‘time of now’ which is shot through with chips of Messianic time” (265). For Benjamin, history assumed linearly, as the beads on a rosary, holds no potency against an enemy, but instead is powerful in flashes and as a “constellation” aware of danger. Dickinson’s rendering of grief, of that which undoes and disorients, becomes a political force as her poetry asserts memories of death in the aftermath of the Civil War. Her poetic tropes of death—of memories of loss from the perils of war—connects post-war time with her own understanding of Messianic time, her reassertions of “Immortality.” We see this theory at work in

Dickinson's letters to Higginson after he loses a wife, then a child, and also as Dickinson loses friends.

The slowness of sorrow undoes a person. Ten years past the Civil War, Dickinson writes that loss and sorrow precede Redemption. Late in life, she has come to acquaint despair with the 'rescue of love.' In 1877, the year Higginson lost his wife, Dickinson's advice is this: "We must be less than Death, to be lessened by it – for nothing is irrevocable but ourselves . . . I had feared to follow you, lest you would be rather be lonely, which is the will of sorrow" (*L*, 519). Self, she tells him, is more than death, even in despair. Her advice to him is to wait: "Danger is not at first, for then we are unconscious, but in the after – slower – Days –/ Do not try to be saved – but let Redemption find you – as it certainly will – Love is it's own rescue, for we – at our supremest, are but it's trembling Emblems –" (*L*, 522). In the Benjaminian sense, Dickinson's sense of time is sacred. Redemption will find you, she tells Higginson. Her consolation for her friend rests in her connection between grief and a Redemptive, or revealed, time.

In June 1878, after the death of Samuel Bowles, Dickinson's longtime friend, she writes to Higginson concerning her sorrow. "When you have lost a friend, Master, you remember you could not begin again, because there was no World. I have thought of you often since the Darkness – though we cannot assist another's Night – I have hoped you were saved – That those have immortality with whom we talked about it, makes it no more mighty – but perhaps more sudden –" (*L*, 553). Here Dickinson's sacred understanding of time again looks forward. She equates salvation with revelation: her articulation of Higginson's 'saving' means a point when he can walk past his sorrow. Time fulfills sorrow—in immortality, Dickinson imagines, revelation will save her from incomprehensible despair.

Between the years 1880 and 1882, Higginson experienced the death of a child and became ill himself. His daughter Louisa died in March 1880 and he was confined to his home in 1882. After

infant Louisa died, Dickinson's letter describes the death as one of "these sudden intimacies with Immortality" and offers Higginson consolation in the her usual form: "Most of our Moments are Moments of Preface – 'Seven Weeks' is a long life – if it is all lived -" Harsh, almost, in her insistence on misunderstood temporality, Dickinson's reckoning with Higginson's grief articulates a new question: beyond the questions of what have I become and what have I lost, the I here does not know time. Similarly, after Higginson fell ill in 1882, Dickinson writes, "Your tradition is still cherished as one of the departures of the Light. To be worthy of what we lose is the supreme Aim—" (*L*, 612). Honor—a purposed life—she insists, marks his life as worthy. His life is worth being lost; Immortality brings fulfillment even as it is unknown. In this letter as in the last, the sense of time and grief compose a constellation that can be linked to the wartime letters: nearly two decades after Dickinson conceptualizes grief as she did during war, that "oblique place."

"Glorious, But How Hard": Letters to a Man of the World

In the oft-anthologized 1863 poem "This is my letter to the World," Dickinson writes:

This is my letter to the World
That never wrote to Me –
The simple News that Nature told –
With tender Majesty

Her Message is committed
To Hands I cannot see –
For love of Her – Sweet – countrymen –
Judge tenderly – of Me (Fr 519)

What still makes Dickinson such a fascinating and baffling figure is that, in fact, she left no 'letters to the World,' or any evidence that she wished for her poetry to be published. In the collection of

poems published shortly after her death, this poem was used as an epigraph, as though her project in poetry was writing to the world from a private place. There is no evidence this is true. This is only one poem, written in 1863. These perplexing facts of her life make her friendship with Higginson all the more intriguing. She did not write letters to the world: she did write letters to this man of the world.

For timeless questions so large she spent her life puzzling through them in poems, Dickinson turned to a man of the times, to Higginson, a reformer through and through, who wrote in his journal: “I cannot remain in the background. Something more will be sought of me—the life of a Reformer, a People’s guide, ‘fighting for the right,’ Glorious, but how hard” (9). This was the Higginson that interested Dickinson. Their friendship of letters illustrates Dickinson’s links to the Civil War and to social reform and activism, if only through her encouragement of a man who devoted his life to such causes. While her poetry rarely overtly or specifically discusses timely issues, her letters engage people, like Higginson, who spent their lives ‘fighting for the right.’

CHAPTER 2

“The only Commandment I have ever obeyed - ‘Consider the Lilies’ ”:
Reading Higginson’s Essays with Dickinson

I crave action, unbounded action. I love men passionately. I feel intensely their suffering and shortcomings and yearn to make all men brothers.

–Thomas Wentworth Higginson

Dickinson’s poems investigate both our hunger for knowledge and our disappointment in the failure of knowledge to satisfy us. What may remain unclear in a reading of these poems is the movement from disappointment to the possibility of intimacy. Dickinson says she dwells in possibility; but that is a difficult region to explore.

– Christopher Benfey

The Experience of Honor

Though Emily Dickinson wrote no letters to the world, Thomas Wentworth Higginson’s life—often referred to as a “sermon on freedom”—might be considered a letter to the world, and certainly many of his own writings were. Emerson’s assertion, “Words are also actions, and actions are a kind of words,” applies to Higginson’s body of work: the seam between Higginson’s writing and his life is almost invisible, as his desire to actively encourage and incite social reform is as apparent in his writing as it is in his life. As was his downfall as a minister at the Church at Newburyport, he was just not ever able to stop reforming. Even, if not especially, as a writer.

As a picture of friendship that crosses boundaries, Dickinson and Higginson enact reform in quite different ways: as I discussed in the previous chapter, their relationship raises questions about the nature of a ‘private poet,’ about the potential of a politicized poetic, and the possibility of

a friendship rather than a hierarchy between poetic and rhetoric. To further take up these questions, I examine the overtly political writings, rhetorical texts in many cases, of Higginson both in the context of Dickinson's poetry and with the awareness that Higginson was one of the first—and only—readers of Dickinson's verse while she was alive.

Before the year 1862 when Dickinson first contacted Higginson, his writing was undoubtedly all she knew of him. As she explains to him in her second letter, presumably after he inquired why she wrote to him: "I read your Chapters in the Atlantic – and experienced Honor for you – I was sure you would not reject a confiding question" (*L* 261). Dickinson's 'experience of Honor' seems ironic in its complicity to speech and public life—Higginson is noble because he will speak, she suggests. She trusts he will not be silent, that he will answer her questions. Her terms for honor are also oddly public in her access to his 'Chapters'; after all they were published in a periodical for the strangers of the public, such as Dickinson.¹⁷

Dickinson appeals to Higginson as a counselor and thus 'honorable man' throughout their friendship. One example occurs in an exchange of letters in 1880, Dickinson calls on Higginson to advise her as a friend, and as a former minister. "You were so kind as to say you would advise me – Could I ask it now—I have promised three hymns to a charity, but without your approval could not give them—" (*L*, 600). Dickinson had agreed to donate poems to a charity event, and she called on Higginson to deem them "profane" or acceptable. She did not ask if they were "good" or not; she asked his advice on the content because of his honor.

Rather than suggest that Dickinson admired Higginson for his fluid prose style, in this chapter I argue that she admires the content of his writing; she thought he was an honorable man, which for her was both more appealing and mysterious. In her poetry this odd appreciation can be

¹⁷ As Alfred Habegger notes, Dickinson used a similar tactic in developing a friendship with Samuel Bowles; the year before she inquired of Higginson, she said to Bowles: "That you will not betray me – it is needless to ask – since Honor is its own pawn" (*My Wars* 453).

seen through her manipulation and play with ideas and themes she read in Higginson's published works and then questioned of him in their correspondence. Higginson's essays turn on themes discussed privately by Dickinson in poetry and in her letters to the colonel. Their relationship through letters reveals a conversation between poetry and the essay; through Dickinson's references to essays she reads, Higginson's themes emerge more clearly in her poetry. Furthermore, threads from poems Dickinson sent Higginson appear in his work later in life, creating an exchange of ideas that move reciprocally from letters to poetry to prose. Beyond the friendship of letters, Higginson and Dickinson's bodies of work appear to be in relationship with one another. The era of reform that ended formally speaking two years before their relationship began, takes on new life in their collective reform of language. Here I illustrate the origins of such a relationship, the reciprocal nature of their literary friendship and its esoteric religious roots, to finally connect the literary friendship to what I argue brought them together: a desire for belief on sincere terms, freed from political and evangelical strictures that dominated the period, a desire for a space open to their collective reform projects, Dickinson's timeless poetic quest on the one hand, and Higginson's timely activist role on the other.

In what follows I examine Higginson's work in light Dickinson's poetry. Higginson is, after all, second only to her sister-in-law, Sue Dickinson, in the number of poems received during Dickinson's lifetime. As a member of Dickinson's select audience, Higginson stands out as the most public figure to be privileged with her verse. I pay particular attention to the poems she sent to him, noting specific cases where she responds to work of his she read. Besides the poems known to have been sent directly to Higginson, I note specific poems that explicitly respond to his writing. Since I am concerned with both a literal and a figurative literary exchange, I consider both writings Higginson published in sources Dickinson is known to read and those she may not have read but which express themes Dickinson was fond of. Imagining a conversation between the work of

Dickinson and Higginson obviously has its limits; to some extent, the exchange of ideas between the two reflects nineteenth-century thought in a broader sense. Further, even though we have evidence of the writings Dickinson had access to, we cannot know with certainty what she actually read besides the works she mentions explicitly in letters. And even her explicit references often come into question given her sardonic tone. Beyond these limits, I must admit that I refer to only a handful of Dickinson's 1700 poems. In some cases I examine poems long discussed and in others I attend to those ignored; in all cases I am first concerned with poems Higginson read and secondly with poems I find directly connected to works of his she read. Higginson, in his own way, was an equally prolific writer, thus I treat only a portion of his work as well, wholly ignoring his fiction and poetry to focus on speeches, sermons, and essays that were intended for a public audience.

I will begin at the beginning: the literal conversation between Emily Dickinson and Thomas Wentworth Higginson commenced with his now famous and perhaps most-read piece, "Letter to a Young Contributor." Dickinson, in response to his call to aspiring artists, sought him out via correspondence. "Letter," published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1862, spells out Higginson's trite and conventional advice for aspiring writers: since she so obstinately refused publication and held the view that fame must find her rather than the reverse, it seems likely she ignored most of this literary advice. The question, of course, remains: what, then, provoked her letter? If publication is not the answer, nor fame or publicity, "If fame belonged to me, I could not escape her – if she did not, the longest day would pass me on the chase," what did she want? (*L*, 408). A preceptor for her flood subject, immortality—a hint of which she found in the close of the otherwise monotonous piece: belief that transcends or redeems the life on a 'yonder planet' provides the subject for Higginson's final paragraph. He writes:

Yet, if our life be immortal, this temporary distinction is of little moment, and we may learn humility, without learning despair, from earth's evanescent glories. Who

cannot bear a few disappointments, if the vista be so wide that the mute inglorious Miltons of this sphere may in some other sing their Paradise as Found? War or peace, fame or forgetfulness, can bring no real injury to one who has formed the fixed purpose to live nobly day by day. I fancy that in some other realm of existence we may look back with a kindly interest on this scene of our earlier life, and say to one another, "Do you remember yonder planet, where we once went to school"? And whether our elective study here lay chiefly in the fields of action or of thought will matter little to us then, when other schools shall have led us through other disciplines. (542)

Here, Higginson proposes nobility as purpose that supersedes the causes that one 'elects to study' for the moment. He suggests here that he understands there is more to art than the marketplace, even though it seems an ironic conclusion to an article so intent on the demands "made by the public upon every composition" (532). Apparently Dickinson saw in his last lines a glimmer of hope he might be a man who would understand her project, someone who would allow her to write for another world, from another world, uninhibited by war or peace, fame or forgetfulness. Dickinson's school led her to study the next sphere; her preoccupation with immortality defined the honor she sought of Higginson.

In a poem Dickinson penned the year "Letter to a Young Contributor" was published, the speaker expresses this theme:

You see I cannot see – your lifetime –
I must guess –
How many times for my far sake
The brave eyes film –
But I guess guessing hurts –

Mine – get so dim! (Fr 313)

As we see in the first stanza of this poem, the idea of a relationship between ‘T’ and ‘you’ provides space to ask questions that seem beyond vision. Friendship, then, with a man whose eyes are brave for his sight of another existence might be one place for the guessing. Friendship was a space to wonder, the place of you and I.

While “Letter to a Young Contributor” most likely elicited Dickinson’s first letter, she regularly read the *Atlantic Monthly*, so by the time of her response to him, she probably placed “Letter” in relation to his other writings. In the four years preceding the commencement of their friendship, Higginson published essays in the *Atlantic Monthly* that exemplify the range of his timely reform projects as well as his investment in naturalist writing. A sampling of these essays published on reform include: “Saints and Their Bodies,” “Ought Woman to Learn the Alphabet,” and “A New Counterblast.” Higginson’s reform efforts, as illustrated just by this small sampling of essay titles, never settled into one movement. He writes as passionately about the dangers of tobacco as he does about the woman question and the evils of slavery.

While Higginson was beginning his career as a champion of women’s rights and leading abolitionist, Dickinson remained at home with a family hostile toward such movements. Dickinson’s father, for example, angrily referred to activist feminists as “scum.” Sue Dickinson, Emily’s sister-in-law, hired an aging ex-slave, Abbie Shaw, to care for her child, Ned, and then promptly fired her when she was found dozing with the babe in her lap (Habegger, “White Heat” 97). Beyond the hostility and apathy of Dickinson’s family toward feminist and abolitionist efforts, the poet’s views concerning race, class, and gender quite often prove “retrograde if not embarrassing” (“White Heat” 98). As Paula Bernat Bennett and Betsy Erkkila have illustrated, Dickinson shared her class’s

conservative social values and its racial attitudes as well.¹⁸ Where Higginson wrote to overturn the pervading social order, in many ways Dickinson's career was possible because it existed.

If we ignore the facts of Dickinson's views concerning human rights, unseemly as they may be, we forget how different she and Higginson actually were, how far the two traveled to share common ground, how unusual it is that she chose one so deeply invested in efforts to 'turn the world upside down,' in Angelina Grimke's description of the abolitionist movement. In the regards outlined above, Dickinson embodies the order that Higginson so wishes to overthrow. It is unquestionable that she benefits from it. Her poetry, in fact, might not exist had she not enjoyed the class privilege that she did.

When Dickinson and Higginson first met, one of the things he remembered her saying to him was, "Women talk: men are silent: that is why I dread women" (342a). Since Dickinson was aware of Higginson's advocacy for women's rights, this statement is loaded with irony. Dickinson sardonically suggests that silence is preferable, at least in her company. The phrase "women talk" holds double irony considering Higginson's support for Dickinson's poetic voice was parallel with his support of women's public voice: he fervently supported Lucy Stone's rhetorical career, whom he described as notable "not so much for the subject . . . but for the speaker" (qtd. in Edelstein 150). Further he argued Stone was "one of the noblest & gentlest persons whom I know, with her homely face & her little Bloomerized-Quakerish person--& her delicious voice; I think the very sweetest voice I have ever heard in public speaking" (151). Beyond his specific support of Stone's speaking

¹⁸ Bennett, Paula Bernat. "The Negro never knew": Emily Dickinson and Racial Typology in the Nineteenth Century." Bennett contrasts Dickinson with other women poets who did engage the great social issues of the nineteenth century in order to reveal Dickinson as one who did not critique the prevailing social order: "If my perception of Dickinson has so radically altered, it is because, after ten years spent studying other nineteenth-century American women poets, I now know much more clearly what she could have done and, therefore, what she did not do" (59). Similarly, in "Emily Dickinson and Class," Betsy Erkkila illustrates how Dickinson is also a product of her elite family, and in this regard she perpetuates the existing hierarchy of nineteenth-century society.

career, Higginson remained devoted to women's rights throughout his life. For Higginson, "there was no place where a man could redeem his manhood better than on the woman's rights platform" (Edelstein 151). While Dickinson, if she even cared about the woman question, preferred to speak from her own quiet platform: verse. Higginson's first impression of the poet further illustrates the irony of his support for women's speech: he recalls he heard "[a] step like a pattering child's in entry & in glided a little plain woman" (L 342a). He describes her speech as "thoroughly ingenuous & simple" (342a). Terse and mysterious, even in person: she told him then, "Gratitude is the only secret that cannot reveal itself" (L 342b).

We can be sure Dickinson knew about Higginson's role in the woman's rights movement because in 1859, Higginson published "Ought Woman to Learn the Alphabet" in the *Atlantic*. He wrote the essay after collaborating with Stone on *Woman's Rights Almanac*. In this satiric essay, besides tracing the history of women's learning, Higginson boldly articulates his belief that to fight for women's rights is to "redeem one's manhood": "[I]here have never been wanting men, and strong men, to echo these appeals" (269). He goes on to argue that the proof is in the discussion: "Ancient or modern, nothing in any of these discussions is so valuable as the fact of discussion itself. There is no discussion where there is no wrong. Nothing so indicates wrong as this morbid self-inspection. The complaints are perpetual protest, the defences [sic] a perpetual confession" (269). Language, Higginson argues, already reveals the end of the argument.

The superb essay, though ironic throughout, closes with this hopeful charge:

Where no logic can prevail, success silences. First give a woman, if you dare, the alphabet, then summon her to her career: and though men, ignorant and prejudiced, may oppose its beginnings, they will at last fling around her conquering footsteps more lavish praises than ever greeted the opera's idol,—more perfumed flowers than ever wooed, with intoxicating fragrance, the fairest butterfly of the ball-room. (282)

The ‘silence of success’ is a theme Dickinson would return to. This passage also reminds one of Dickinson’s admission in her second letter to Higginson: “I have a Brother and Sister – My Mother does not care for thought – and Father, too busy with his Briefs – to notice what we do – He buys me many Books – but begs me not to read them – because he fears they joggle the Mind” (261). Dickinson’s father, Edward Dickinson, reportedly controlling and manipulative, would have extreme disdain for a man like Higginson and his reformulation of gender codes. After all, Higginson was not just arguing for education of women. He took the argument to what he saw as its logical conclusion: he wanted rights for women because he wanted renewed relations between men and women. His friendship with Dickinson provides one picture of such a friendship.

Higginson’s most fervent cause, however, was ending slavery. While Higginson remained devoted to various reform efforts, abolitionism was most significant to him. In Chapter 1 I suggested that Higginson, not John Brown, provides the poet’s closest link to militant abolitionism. While Higginson did not publish his views concerning Brown in *The Atlantic*, he did write “A Visit to John Brown’s Household” which circulated in 1860 as part of James Redpath’s *The Public Life of Captain John Brown*.¹⁹

In the essay Higginson heralds the Brown family’s eternal sense of purpose:

Do you ask why they live in such a bleak spot? With John Brown and his family there is a reason for everything, and it is always the same reason. Strike into their lives anywhere, and you find the same purpose at bottom, and to the widest questioning the same prompt answer comes ringing back, —the very motto of the tombstone—, “For adherence to the cause of freedom.” The same purpose, nay, the

¹⁹ Whether or not Dickinson read this essay remains unknown, but it did circulate before she first wrote him, so it is possible (if not likely) she was, at the very least, aware Higginson backed John Brown.

selfsame project that sent John Brown to Harper's Ferry sent him to the Adirondacks. (235)

Higginson's sermon on freedom so often returns to death, which in the passage above the tombstone symbolizes; his conception of freedom begets eternal life. Brown and his family, for Higginson, provide a model of generations freed from the guise that only the school of today matters. The epitaph to which Higginson refers is engraved upon the tombstone of another Captain John Brown, one who died during the Revolution: "It is a strange thing to see any thing so old, where all the works of man are new! but it is an old, mossy, time-worn tombstone—not marking any grave, not set in the ground, but resting against the house as if its time were either past or not yet come. Both are true—it has a past duty and a future one" (234). Higginson's essay about Brown returns to the line from "Letter to a Young Contributor": "War or peace, fame or forgetfulness, can bring no real injury to one who has formed the fixed purpose to live nobly day by day" (542). Brown can never be injured in Higginson's eyes: his gaze was ever on the fixed purpose.

Since Higginson openly admired Thoreau and Emerson, it is not surprising that this theme from "A Visit to John Brown's Household" appears in a similar manner in Thoreau's impassioned "A Plea for Captain John Brown." Thoreau writes, "I am here to plead his cause with you. I plead not for his life, but for his character—his immortal life; and it becomes your cause wholly, and is not his in the least. Some eighteen hundred years ago Christ was crucified; this morning, perchance, Captain Brown was hung. These are the two ends of a chain which is not without its links. He is not Old Brown any longer; he is an angel of light" (377). Like Dickinson, Higginson and Thoreau raise the stakes: 'his immortal life' is the cause. Thoreau's line provides the theme that does give Dickinson vestment in reform even though she never termed it as such. Character, not life: immortality the cause, and nothing less.

Hope of Liberty: the Blindness of Today

From one perspective, Higginson's role in the transcendentalist movement may have made him more attractive as a friend and reader to Dickinson. After all, the religious liberalism of the transcendentalists helped Dickinson struggle with her Calvinist heritage (McIntosh).²⁰ Further religious liberalism was the strand to which Higginson made his most notable contribution to transcendental thought, since he, though a latecomer to the movement, published "The Sympathy of Religions" which "set the tone for the single most important focus of late-stage Transcendentalist religious thought during the decades after the Civil War" (Buell xvii). The essay remains remarkable for its definition of religion on global terms, and because it lacks "a lingering judgmentalism of one or both of the following sorts: either Christianity came out more or less on top, as the highest stage to which world religious consciousness had yet advanced, or the particularities of all religious traditions were more or less written off in the course of arguing for a bedrock of religious consciousness inherent in the human spirit" (Buell 182).

"The Sympathy of Religions," a lecture that encapsulates what had long undergirded Higginson's belief in individual liberties, expresses his desire for one believers who 'outgrow limitations': "When we fully comprehend the sympathy of religions we shall deal with other faiths on fairer terms. We shall cease trying to free men from one superstition by inviting them into another. The true missionaries are men inside each religion who have outgrown its limitations" (371). Perhaps Higginson would have been more correct to say true missionaries are women: more specifically, Dickinson.²¹ What Dickinson wanted in Higginson, and what she found, was someone

²⁰Some scholars argue that in this regard Dickinson was infatuated with the writings of Emerson. I, however, agree with James McIntosh who argues: "In an ideological sense Emerson was but one religious liberal among many who helped her struggle with her Calvinist heritage. . . . she displays not an infatuation but a whimsical interest in his poetic language along with a vague respect for his public image" (15).

²¹ This idea is expressed again in "Scripture Idolatry," as Higginson writes: "O that men could learn the salvation of mankind does not need shelter in their refuge of lies; that doubt is not dangerous, except to that which is dubious" (346).

aware of Christianity but open to her questions, for she did not seem to desire answers. Her place was possibility, her quest an exploration contingent upon ignoring boundaries. One of Dickinson's late poems, "Apparently with no surprise," takes up this quest:

Apparently with no surprise
To any happy Flower
The Frost beheads it at its play –
In accidental power –
The blonde Assassin passes on –
The Sun proceeds unmoved
To measure off another Day
For an Approving God – (Fr 1668)²²

The speaker of this poem, in the fashion characteristic of Dickinson, interrogates a sovereign, Calvinist Deity. This speaker, standing in a place outside the limitations of religion, sympathizes with the natural world, "the happy flower." The powerful Deity must approve: this a poem that probes the boundaries of the unlimited power of God, a question that Higginson might have encouraged, and certainly one he would have remained open to. The Approving God watches as the innocent flower loses its life; what the speaker fears is the accidental power that renders the sovereign God an assassin.

While "The Sympathy of Religions" provides a summary of Higginson's religious liberal ideology, the ideas appear throughout his thought. The idea of a shared vision, steadfast against blindness, emerges in Higginson's sermon, "The Clergy and Reform." The sermon, delivered in 1847, is an example of an early version of his doctrine of Christ-like love through a capacity for

²² This poem provides the point of departure for Patrick Keane's study of the debate between faith and skepticism, God and science, in the work of Dickinson. *Emily Dickinson's Approving God: Divine Design and the Problem of Suffering*. Columbia: U of Missouri P, 2008.

moral indignation. In the speech, delivered on Visitation Day at Harvard Divinity School after his graduation, blindness obviates reform:

God forbid that we should begin our career by aspersing others or boasting of ourselves. But God forbid that we should *not* begin by seeing clearly and owning candidly that state of the times in which we are called to work. There is no boastfulness, there is no irreverence in humble aspirations. We are faithless to our fathers if we do not begin where they left off instead of stopping there. We are faithless to ourselves if we do not look with our own eyes, speak our own thoughts and act our own life. (329)

Clear-sightedness and liberty are inextricably connected for Higginson. Already influenced by the bedrocks of transcendental thought, Higginson argues here for youthful vision and vigor, rejection or reformation of the stodgy misperceptions of the generation before. Blindness, here, works as an expected metaphor; failure to see the present clearly obstructs one's ability to transform it. The trope of 'blindness' illustrates the manner in which Higginson and Dickinson understood the connections between reform, immortality, and hope. Also we can see their exchange extend beyond just writings Dickinson read. She may not have encountered "Clergy and Reform" (though she did enjoy reading sermons), but still her engagement of Higginson's trope of 'clear-sightedness,' and her reversal of this trope, illustrates how their literary exchange extended beyond the literal. Her poem "I know that He exists," provides an example of her variation on this trope. The poem begins:

I know that He exists
Somewhere – in silence –
He has hid his rare life
From our gross eyes (Fr 365)

Not only is the Deity here hidden from the eyes, but from the ears as well. The speaker cannot see or hear from God; ‘gross eyes’ connote deserved blindness, a Calvinist association with the doctrine of total depravity. Blindness, for Dickinson, precedes hope; revelation and sight entail an understanding of the eternal, the unknown. In this private poetic version of reform, the speaker yet again assaults the silent Deity who creates blindness through secrecy. Like the speaker in “Apparently with no surprise,” the speaker of this poem struggles to reconcile the distance between the sovereign God of Calvinist theology with the questions that emerge from religious liberalism. The speaker suggests that one only feels blind; the sensation of lacking sight and the silence emanate from the action of the Deity. This speaker proposes no answer. For Higginson blindness must be avoided in order to reform of the times, Dickinson allows it; her project is timeless. Sight can wait.

“The defect is not in language, but in men”: From Prose to Poetry, and Back Again

After Dickinson and Higginson became friends, their letters to one another frequently included references to their own writing, the private poetry of Dickinson and the public essays of Higginson. Interestingly Dickinson only mentions Higginson’s writings to Higginson; she does not reference him in other correspondence, though they shared mutual friends (Capps 109-111). However Dickinson appears to have enjoyed playing with Higginson’s themes and then reasserting them to him: take Dickinson’s 1863 postscript, for instance: “I trust the ‘Procession of Flowers’ was not a premonition,” for example, refers to his essay published in the *Atlantic* in December 1862. Higginson’s essay, a meditation on the seasonal lives of flowers, conjures several favorite images of Dickinson’s: he writes, “But, after all, the fascination of summer lies not in any details, however, perfect, but in the sense of total wealth which summer gives. Wholly to enjoy this, one must give one’s self passively to it, and not expect to reproduce it in words” (482). For Higginson, as an essayist attempting to capture the mysteries of the natural world, he deems not prose but himself unworthy of its ‘total wealth’; he goes on:

The defect is not in language, but in men. There is no conceivable beauty of blossom so beautiful as words,—none so graceful, none so perfumed. It is possible to dream of combinations of syllables so delicious that all the dawning and decay of summer cannot rival their perfection, nor winter’s stainless white and azure match their purity and their charm. To write them, were it possible, would be to take rank with Nature; no is there any other method, even by music, for human art to reach so high. (482)

Here, the blossoms of nature are incomparable to words, in every sense. Higginson imagines that there is writing that can rival and surpass nature, but he, for all his worldly causes, would never find a home in language. Dickinson, we might say, is at home nowhere else. Because she makes poetry her place, language her haven, she critiques language. The 1862 poem, “This is My Letter to the World,” that I mentioned at the close of chapter 1 expresses this idea, as does the 1863 poem, “How many Flowers fail in Wood”:

How many Flowers fail in Wood
Or perish from the Hill –
Without the privilege to know
That they are Beautiful -

How many cast a nameless Pod
Opon the nearest Breeze –
Unconscious of the Scarlet Freight
It bear to other eyes - (Fr 798)

Similar to “This is my Letter to the World,” the speaker suggests that language fails to speak to the natural world; there is more that belongs “to the Hands [she] cannot see.” Here it fails to communicate with nature. Flowers die unaware of their beauty, of the words they encourage.

Dickinson effectively reverses Higginson's charge: for love of nature, language fails. In "This is my Letter to the World," there is a message hidden away that no poet can touch. The speaker requests no one hold her responsible for failing to express the inexpressible. In "How many Flowers fail in Wood," the suggestion again is that there are no words, no syllables to capture 'Scarlet Freight.' The irony is that this poem critiques its own perfection. Dickinson attains what Higginson can only imagine, and as a result, she goes further. One imagines these are the combinations of syllables Higginson could only dream of, two stanzas that powerfully invoke and then overturn what Higginson spent twenty-five pages detailing. To use Higginson's phrase, Dickinson 'takes rank with Nature.'

Still Higginson's naturalist writings are among his best works, and as a writer of nature, many consider him to rival John Muir and John Burroughs (Meyer 2). Two 1862 *Atlantic* essays, "Water Lilies" and "Life of Birds," exemplify the naturalist writing Higginson published during the period before he and Dickinson's friendship began. "Water Lilies" alludes to the Gospels of Christ, as Higginson takes as his subject 'considering the lilies.' He moves through his descriptions with phrases like "But we must return to our lilies," and then later: "Consider the lilies. All over our rural watercourses, at midsummer, float these cups of snow. They are Nature's symbols of coolness. . . . So perfect in form, so redundant in beauty, so delicate, so spotless, so fragrant,--what presumptuous lover ever dared, in his most enamored hour, to liken his mistress to a waterlily?" (420).²³

Perhaps Dickinson had Higginson's essay in mind when she wrote in an 1876 letter, "[T]he only Commandment I ever obeyed - 'Consider the lilies' " (L 940). While Dickinson certainly meant

²³ Capps notes that this essay also provides the theme for the poem "At Half past Three, a single Bird." Capps quotes this portion of H's essay as his evidence: "Precisely at half-past three, a song-sparrow above our heads gave one liquid trill that seemed to set to music every atom of freshness and fragrance that Nature held; then the spell was broken and the whole shore and lake were vocal with song."

this playfully, I would like to suggest this statement reveals her as the profound student of the New Testament that she was, and perhaps holds as much truth about her convictions as it does irony. The line comes from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, and I will consider the passage from Luke's Gospel because it begins with "Consider the birds," which I see to be connected with Dickinson's point. In Luke, chapter 12, he quotes the words of Christ:

Consider the ravens: for they neither sow nor reap; which neither have storehouse nor barn; and God feedeth them: how much more are ye better than the fowls?

And which of you with taking thought can add to his stature one cubit?

If ye then be not able to do that thing which is least, why take ye thought for the rest?

Consider the lilies how they grow: they toil not, they spin not; and yet I say unto you, that Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.

If then God so clothe the grass, which is to day in the field, and to morrow is cast into the oven; how much more will he clothe you, O ye of little faith?

And seek not ye what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink, neither be ye of doubtful mind. (Luke 12.24-28)

The above passage takes birds, then flowers, as its subjects: if such creatures of nature are cared for, then much more people. The parable argues against materialism and in favor of belief rather than worry. In the larger context of the passage, though, the parable argues against more than materialism and worry:

For all these things do the nations of the world seek after: and your Father knoweth that ye have need of these things.

But rather seek ye the kingdom of God; and all these things shall be added unto you.

Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.
(Luke 12.29-31)

Within this parable is the injunction: “seek ye the kingdom of God; and all these things shall be added unto you.” In quoting this passage as the ‘only commandment’ she ever obeyed, Dickinson alludes to Christ’s claim that all of the Law, and thereby all the commandments, is summed up as: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind” (Matthew 22.37). “Consider the lilies” can be seen as a reference to Christ as fulfillment and summation of the law, and her profound conviction that religion did not require her to ‘give up the world.’ For Dickinson and for Higginson, religion—belief—entailed the lilies and the birds.

In March of 1879, Charles Wadsworth, Presbyterian minister and another of Dickinson’s correspondents, preached a sermon “Adorning the Truth.” The sermon may have been read or heard by Dickinson (she favored his preaching and heard him on many occasions), perhaps not, but Wadsworth’s perspective, as one greatly admired by Dickinson, further suggests Dickinson meant more than satire in ‘considering the lilies.’ In the sermon Wadsworth takes Titus 2.10 as his text: “Adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things” (Titus). Wadsworth’s claim is that believers must not steal ‘life’ from truth; they must ‘adorn’ it, make it beautiful. He defines adorn as “decorate or beautify, as with gems or garlands or goodly apparel” (305). Though the Titus passage is his point of exegesis, he references Dickinson’s beloved commandment as well: “Speaking of God’s infinite operations, there is no vociferation about omniscience and omnipresence, or overwhelming of us with the great forces of the universe, but, instead, the tender benediction: ‘Behold the birds; consider the lilies.’” (305). Wadsworth uses the point as evidence Christ ‘beautified’ truth. Obviously the idea of ‘living’ truth is important to Dickinson, and the connection Wadsworth makes between the life of doctrine and Christ’s reliance on creatures to teach about the ‘infinite operations’ of God suggests that, as usual, one sentence written by Dickinson expresses lengthy passages of others.

In 1862, Higginson published “The Life of Birds” in the *Atlantic*. This is another piece Dickinson likely read before she first wrote to Higginson. In the essay, Higginson imagines the hidden life of birds from the standpoint of an observer. He writes:

When one thinks of a bird, one fancies a soft, swift thing, full of nervous energy and arrowy motions,--a song with wings. So remote from ours their mode of existence, they seem accidental exiles from an unknown globe, banished where none can understand their language; and men only stare at their darting, inexplicable ways, as gyrations of the circus. Watch their little traits for hours, and it only tantalizes curiosity. Every man’s secret is penetrable, if his neighbor is clear-sighted (457).

This passage, laden with aphorism characteristic of transcendental writers, never moors the distance between the bird and the watcher, a role that Dickinson favored. She seemed to take these lines as her challenge: the ‘accidental exiles from an unknown globe’ were among her favorite and most intimate characters. The speakers of Dickinson’s poems are fluent in the language of birds; her poems penetrate the secret, darting, and inexplicable ways of birds. In “The Birds reported from the South –” for example, the birds report directly to a speaker:

The Birds reported from the South –

A News express to Me –

A spicy Charge, My little Posts –

But I am deaf – Today –

The Flowers – appealed – a timid Throng –

I reinforced the Door –

Go blossom to the Bees – I said –

And trouble Me – no More –

The Summer Grace, for notice strove –

Remote – Her best Array –

The Heart – to stimulate the Eye

Refused too utterly –

At length, a Mourner, like Myself,

She drew away austere –

Her frosts to ponder – then it was

I recollected Her-

She suffered Me, for I had mourned –

I offered Her no word –

My Witness – was the Crape I bore –

Her – Witness – was Her Dead –

Thenceforward – We – together dwelt –

She – never questioned Me –

Nor I – Herself –

Our Contract

A Wiser Sympathy (Fr 780)

The first quatrain of the poem illustrates the idea that the birds have no secrets; their language is clear. The speaker, however, cannot hear the news of the birds, nor does she wish to hear from the

flowers. “Trouble me no more” suggests the speaker shuts out the birds and the flowers because she does not wish to hear from them, thus her deafness is willful. The life of birds is not so secret here: rather, the speaker hides her eyes and ears from such a life in the first stanzas presumably because the deaths of nature require much sympathy that the speaker has not acquired. By the final stanza, however, the speaker overcomes her apathy by uniting with ‘Summer Grace’ in shared grief. Both the speaker and the character personifying nature know loss, and in mourning they speak one another’s language.

Dickinson, perhaps like some others of her era, held a special interest in the hummingbird (Benfey). In “The Life of Birds,” Higginson mentions the hummingbird as the ‘loneliest of birds’: “What ‘sympathetic penetration’ can fathom life, for instance, of yonder mysterious, almost voiceless, Humming-Bird, smallest of feathery things, and loneliest, whirring among birds, insect-like, and among insects, bird-like, his path untraceable, his home unseen?” (457). The idea of a lonely creature without a known path or home appears in “A Route of Evanescence”:

A Route of Evanescence,
With a revolving Wheel –
A Resonance of Emerald
A Rush of Cochineal –
And every Blossom on the Bush
Adjusts its tumbled Head –
The Mail from Tunis – probably,
An easy Morning’s Ride – (Fr 1489).²⁴

²⁴ For a book-length study on hummingbirds among nineteenth-century writers, see Benfey, Christopher. *A Summer of Hummingbirds*. New York: Penguin, 2008.

While it is somewhat unclear who the character here is, after all ambiguity is the air Dickinson's poetry breathes, like "The Birds reported from the South," the poem traverses the terrain between passive observer and characters of nature. Too, this is a poem about shared empathy: blossoms adjust their heads, uncomfortable when the wind blows.

Besides her subversion of ideas in Higginson's nature essays, Dickinson's poems engage themes from Higginson's sermons and editorials. In an essay, "Tell the Truth," published in the 1884 edition of *Women's Journal*, Higginson admonishes those who made libelous charges against Grover Cleveland. He seeks not to engage political debate over Cleveland's merit as a presidential candidate, but to speak for the cause of just and honest speech during hotly contested elections: "Of course truth is truth, from whatever source it comes, but calm and judicial truth, in a difficult question of private action, rarely comes from the heat of politics" (379). Unlike the title, Higginson qualifies truth, and questions the use of 'honesty' without thought to its end: "Political debate can deal, though imperfectly, with public acts, because these are matters of public record, accessible to all. But facts of private life, whose evidence lies mainly in rumor and gossip, are rarely to be found justly or even decently handled by political editors or committees" (379). Although it is unlikely Higginson read Dickinson's poem "Tell all the truth but tell it slant" before her death two years later, his editorial appears to reflect her version of truth-telling:

Tell all the truth but tell it slant –
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise
As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually

Or every man be blind – (Fr 1263)

In this widely anthologized poem, Dickinson discusses truth from a prophetic standpoint. Like the speaker in “I Know that He exists,” the trope at work here is blindness. However in this poem, the prophet or truth-teller to whom the poem is addressed is warned to be careful with his subject.

Withholding truth then protects one from blindness. The prophet then is one who knows how to ‘dazzle gradually,’ and to speak truth in stages, and to ears and eyes prepared for it.

Besides ‘truth,’ another of Dickinson’s most widely read poems, “Success is counted sweetest,” twists a theme from one of Higginson’s essays. In a reflection on his life in reform, “Unconscious Success,” Higginson opens with the words of a veteran English reformer, John Jacob Holyoke, “The unconscious progress of fifty years is equivalent to a revolution” (qtd. in 515). In this rare terse essay Higginson renders in prose what Dickinson’s verse conveys:

Success is counted sweetest

By those who ne’er succeed.

To comprehend a nectar

Require sorest need.

Not one of all the purple Host

Who took the Flag today

Can tell the definition

So clear of Victory

As he defeated – dying –

On whose forbidden ear

The distant strains of triumph

Burst agonized and clear! (Fr 112)

While Higginson and Dickinson theorize success in similar terms, their ideas of literary success differ in the respects that Higginson has so oft been critiqued for. Indeed literary success for Dickinson remains somewhat elusive: how did she determine success for a poem? We still do not know how to decide which poems are finished, or if she even desired to take a poem to a final, finished state. The mess of her workshop suggests her notion of poetic success may not translate into any terms comprehensible to the twenty-first century observer.²⁵

Legend and Love in one: Reform and Scripture

No book was more important to Dickinson's poetry than the King James Bible (McIntosh 81). In considering the conversation between Dickinson and Higginson concerning the Bible, I return us to Wadsworth's sermon, "Adorning the Truth": "The retribution He preaches is a result of our sinful sowing, from which His coming to earth was to deliver us. And thus in all His theologic teachings their characteristic is loveliness. 'He adorned the truth,' and we violate the text's precepts and are not at all like Christ whenever we exhibit any great Bible doctrine either as a dead skeleton from the grave or an appalling spectre from eternity" (306). Here Wadsworth describes how the teaching of Christ must be 'adorned'—adornment, he suggests, must bring Scripture to life.

Higginson understood Scriptural skeletons to mean interpreting narratives literally. When presented with the opportunity to become a minister a second time, immediately in his installation sermon he let the congregation know what they were in for. Perhaps anxious to avoid being ousted by another church, Higginson began with the theme of Scriptural Idolatry, which he connected to his radical politics. Church members must not be so blind as to think they are free to take the Bible

²⁵ As Wineapple describes it: "[L]iterature was improvisation, much like Emily's concoctions at the piano, remembered by all who heard them, and her poems were always in progress, meant to be revised, revaluated, and reconceived, especially when dispatched to different readers, as her editors would soon discover" (272).

literally, or to think it kept them from participating in reform efforts. The life of Scripture affects life, he argued, in a manner similar to Dickinson's other favorite preacher, Wadsworth. Slavery, Higginson contended, should of course be opposed, but the congregation must not ignore other causes, particularly rights of women, land reform, the ten-hour day, prison conditions, and child labor (12). Scripture Idolatry, interpreting Biblical narratives to be literal and thereby 'dead' truth, was dangerous and must be avoided.²⁶

While Higginson's reform efforts took their heart from 'adorning the truth,' so did Dickinson's poetry. Since she rejected doctrinal definitions of belief, adorning truth brought her to faith. Even as she wavered and changed, interrogated and doubted, and only remained resolute only in her vacillation, Dickinson did believe, just not in terms that translate from verse to definition. Central to this belief was her reformulation of Biblical narratives. Together Dickinson and Higginson 'reformed' the Bible; Dickinson in verse, and Higginson through ecumenical statements dissenting with the conservative religious mindset Dickinson found so odious.

Since the greater atmosphere of New England was characterized by a tension between the impulse "to seize visionary authority and the awareness of the quixoticism of that desire—by a skepticism about art's authority that came both from without (the general public) and from within," it is not surprising that Scripture remained a source from which Higginson and Dickinson drew authority (Buell 72). As I have shown in the context of their naturalist writings, the two exchanged Biblical allusions. Besides those specific allusions, Scriptural debates were obviously central to reform efforts and to Higginson's role as a minister. And Dickinson derived 'visionary authority,' in part at least, from her emergence in a line of female biblical prophets.

²⁶ In 1857 he would expand these ideas into a lecture entitled "Scripture Idolatry" that was published in *The Secular Miscellany*. Whether or not Dickinson read or encountered this sermon, her poetry took its life from interrogating the literal truth of Scripture.

Somewhat ironically, Dickinson's preferred characters were male: Jacob, Moses and Jesus (McIntosh 81). Jacob appealed to Dickinson for obvious reasons: she liked the idea of wrestling with God. Jacob, apparently, impressed Higginson as well. In the collection of Negro spirituals he published in his war diary *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, his favorite concerned Dickinson's preferred pugilist. The final stanza of the song portrays Jacob dangling from a shaky tree: "O, Jacob, do hang from a tremblin' limb, He would not let him go! O, Jacob do hang from a tremblin' limb; De Lord will bless my soul. O wrestlin' Jacob, Jacob" (*Army* 161).

Of the collecting process, Higginson writes: "Writing down in the darkness, as best I could,--perhaps with my hand in the safe covert of my pocket,--the words of the song, I have afterwards carried it to my tent, like some captured bird or insect, and then, after examination, put it by" (149). The collection, in general, is marked by a desire to let the spirituals speak their own power; he comments only briefly on the songs. However, he does describe the power he finds in the Jacob spiritual as the "most striking of the whole series: there is a mystical effect and a passionate striving throughout the whole. The Scriptural struggle between Jacob and the angel, which is only dimly expressed in the words, seems all uttered in the music. I think it impressed my imagination more powerfully than any other of these songs" (160). He writes as an observer, as one removed from the power of the song, but deeply impressed by it.

Dickinson, a reader of *Army Life*, mentioned the spirituals on several occasions to Higginson after he published them. Perhaps she remembered his interest in Jacob, since in one of her last letters, she writes to him through the story of Jacob:

I have been very ill, Dear friend, since November, bereft of Book and
Thought, by the Doctor's reproof, but begin to roam in my Room now –
I think of you with absent Affection, and the Wife and Child I never have
seen, Legend and Love in one –

Audacity of Bliss, said Jacob to the Angel “I will not let thee go except I
bless thee” –Pugilist and Poet, Jacob was correct—

Your Scholar – (*L*, 903)

She sent this letter to him a few months before her death. At the very end of their friendship, Dickinson expresses what brought them together in the first place: a room to roam in, a place for possibility, a partner in her restive quest to engage poetry, deity, and the lilies and the ravens she refused to give up. Someone to listen to her muse, “If we love Flowers, are we not ‘born again’ every Day, without the distractions of Nicodemus?” (*L*, 1037).

CONCLUSION

Away, then, with all gloom and despondency! Let us walk this ruined world with flashing eyes and hearts bounding. Ours is a high calling and a glorious work. We are walking with God and walking toward immortality.

—Charles Wadsworth, 1879

Mr. Higginson, Are you too deeply occupied to say if my verse is Alive?

—ED in a letter to TWH, April 1862

Deity – does He live now?

My friend – does he breathe?

—ED in a letter to TWH, May 1886

There has been quite a lot written about the relationship between Higginson and Dickinson in years past. Dickinson studies is a vast enterprise in itself, with few facets of the poet's life left untouched. When I began this study, the seven shelves of Dickinson scholarship nearly sent me looking for another figure. The obvious question posed by a century of scholarship: what is left to say?

But with Emily Dickinson, there will always be more to say. Mostly, of course, because scholars can only ever uncover so much of the enigmatic poet's life. Since she is one of the rare figures mostly unpublished in her lifetime, we are always looking back. Few people looked directly at Dickinson as a poet. Higginson is one of them.

Probably because questions about Dickinson's life will continue to elude us, we imagine that the key to her poetry lies in her biography, a seam that will likely never appear. As Alfred Habegger describes it, the task of the literary biographer is to expose the seam between an artist's life and his work. With Dickinson, however, the seam is doubly hidden because the vast majority of her work was discovered after her death and because she left her workshop in shambles—poems often

unfinished, and frequently on napkins or scraps of paper, as though she never really intended for anyone to see them. Of all the mysteries of Dickinson's life, this may be the biggest: she left no evidence that she cared if the world ever saw her poems.

Higginson did see many of them while she was alive, though he has chiefly been remembered for what he did to the mess of poems she left behind. My aim, here, has been to examine two seams at once, drawing together the overlapping lives and writings of Higginson and Dickinson to suggest their friendship sheds light in four directions: man and woman, rhetoric and poetic. What I found, and what I hope to have shown, is that the light often shifted in unexpected ways. As I asked 'why choose Higginson?' I found that similar questions might be applied to a number of friendships in both of their lives. Friendship, it seems, was often an exciting and boundary-crossing endeavor in nineteenth-century America.

I have only touched the surface of the conversation between their writings. Chapter 2 allowed me the space to gloss the major themes that recur, but their literary conversation bears much more analysis than I have had the time to engage. The connections between Dickinson's employment of flowers and birds she encountered in Higginson's essays before her first letter might provide a useful study. The final section in Chapter 2 deserves more explication: Dickinson engages many more of the Biblical narratives from Higginson's collection of spirituals than Jacob. Scholars interested in Dickinson's views on religion should take up her reading of Higginson's public and often political religious writings. Besides her employment of Biblical narratives she encounters in *Army Life*, scholars interested in her politics and views on human rights should not ignore her reading of this important Civil War document.

Higginson's writings deserve much more attention than they have been given. I am particularly surprised that he has not been treated by scholars of rhetoric as a part of the larger reform rhetoric discussion. The range of his writings and lectures on reform efforts should be

examined as a part of the rhetoric of social reform. Also, his friendship with Lucy Stone and other women active in the suffrage movement links him to the growing body of work concerning women's rhetorics. Besides his persuasive texts, his novels and poetry might provide fruitful sights of analysis for scholars invested in literature and the environment.

The questions that I include as epigraphs began and ended the correspondence of Dickinson and Higginson. Noting this, Judith Farr argues, "As her use or abandonment of the capital letter 'H' reveals, Emily Dickinson wanted to know if God 'live[d]' as her verse lived and also whether Higginson himself, who had been ill, still 'breathe[d]?' In the case of deity, poetry, and friendship 'the Alive' was what counted to her" (Farr 179). I read Dickinson's second question differently; rather than see the question directed at Higginson, I think Dickinson repeats her first question a second time. In the second version of 'Does God live,' Dickinson's ever present tension with belief appears; she abandons the capital 'H' in the second sequence because she often felt trapped between Deism and Pantheism—He and he—the God that is utterly removed from the world and the one who is creation. This tension was one that Dickinson alternately fought and manipulated; she made use of her doubts in God because she never escaped them. Dickinson chose Higginson because he brought the strands of deity, poetry, and friendship together: she knew Higginson *lived*, and she deemed him honorable for it.

'Consider the lilies': she believed truth should be brought to life. Dickinson desired poetry that breathed truth, and in Higginson she saw a person who did the same.

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